

## *Retelling Chambri Lives: Ontological Bricolage*

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Anthropology has recently become caught up in debates about ontology(ies) and the nature of difference(s) in a twenty-first-century world where people are rooted in place, go and come through national if not transnational routes, and are increasingly routed by warfare and natural disasters.<sup>1</sup> To contribute to these debates, we provide an update on the collective “biography” of those men and women whose ongoing engagements with fluctuating standards defining personal and collective worth we first documented in 1991, based on 1987 fieldwork. In *Twisted Histories, Altered Contexts*, we presented interlocking stories along with commentaries and contexts concerning Chambri people of Papua New Guinea’s East Sepik Province—people who by then were active participants in an encroaching and shifting regional, national, as well as world system. Here, incorporating fieldwork extending over the subsequent twenty-eight years, we describe what has happened to some of them. Our updated biography, as in *Twisted Histories, Altered Contexts*, remains partial and unfinished. Apparent in our biography, to cite Andrew Robson in Brij V Lal and Vicki Luker’s *Telling Pacific Lives* (2008), are “historical specificities, local histories, and individual stories” rather than “grand themes and pronouncements . . . on large-scale topics” (2008, 195). Yet, because our biography is collective, we also recognize with Sarah Green that the “historically and socially framed entanglements” of the world, while diverse and complex, are not random (2015, 1).

As Green argued, the ways in which these entanglements have been recognized and understood—albeit sometimes bracketed—reflect how the anthropological enterprise has been conceptualized and practiced over time. For example, both of us were hired when many departments of

anthropology, themselves classified within the academy as occupying an ahistorical “savage slot” (Trouillot 2003), desired someone to epitomize this slot, frequently someone with research in Papua New Guinea, or perhaps Melanesia more broadly. This research, as Martha Macintyre related in a review article concerning contemporary Melanesia (2013), focused on a seemingly circumscribed tribal group whose members engaged in (and here we elaborate on her description) the likes of regional exchange systems involving competitive reciprocity; warfare including headhunting (if not cannibalism); male secret societies with complex initiations and masked figures; and, with European contact, cargo cults. The goal of this research was often comparative so as to document the range of human variability, especially “them” in contrast to “us.”

Concerning Papua New Guinea, there was, for instance, Bronislaw Malinowski’s broadly influential *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922), written to demonstrate that not all people were homo economicus (that is, consistently rational and narrowly self-interested agents). In addition, there was Margaret Mead’s popular *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* (1933), written to show that male domination was not universal. In effect, Melanesianists could establish pedagogically strategic contrasts with their alterities. They could produce, as Vincent Crapanzano put it, “defamiliarization, alienation, or self-distancing,” leading “us (and no doubt in different fashions, the people we work with) to overcoming, or at least recognizing, social constriction and cultural blindness—ultimately, to a reevaluation of our respective cultural presumptions” (2003, 4).

For many Melanesianists of our generation, assignment to the quintessential savage slot could be an academic asset. The two of us could convey aspects of life in the three villages on Chambri Island as wonderfully exotic—this despite systematic European contact since the 1930s, including a resident European priest since the 1950s. We might describe Chambri men’s house debates with their flamboyant competition. How, awakened by booming slit-gong drums, men would converge in elaborate men’s houses (once, fifteen of them) to contend, in archaic Chambri, about their ritual prerogatives. How, mingling dance and oratory, they would allude to their particular secret totemic names and attendant special powers: to those effecting their identity with the ancestral crocodiles that had established Chambri as people and Chambri Island as place; to those regulating their portion of the universe in its succession of seasonal changes; to those ensuring the well-being of their patrilans; to those making their rivals fearful; and to much more. We might also show how these eminent men

retained and manifested their power by arranging strategic marriages for themselves and their children: marriages for which high bride prices were paid and received; marriages that upheld and ordered multigenerational alliances (as with mother's brother's clans); marriages that ensured that their sons joined them, together with their in-marrying wives and children (the latter as new members of the patriclan), in large and impressive houses. We could, in other words—and quite truthfully—convey to colleagues and students many aspects of Chambri life as refreshingly, perhaps thrillingly, different from that of most Euro-Americans.

These social and cultural contrasts, albeit palpable during our 1987 fieldwork, were not all we sought to convey as we represented the Chambri. We sought additionally to establish that they were not frozen in time, not the “last unknown,” but were increasingly caught up in the same world as the rest of us. Indeed, we—and other anthropologists writing then—sought to understand how major parameters of Papua New Guinean lives were being significantly transformed. A relatively recent colonial presence (in most cases, beginning no earlier than the late nineteenth century) had wrought effects that were dramatic, intense, and indelible.<sup>2</sup> Papua New Guineans, whose readily available experience frequently bridged the pre-contact and the transnational and whose sensibilities might encompass the indigenous and the postmodern, were preoccupied in thinking about and negotiating change: thinking about and negotiating the transformative entanglements and articulations between local realities and regional, national, and global exigencies and opportunities. (Significantly, Mead had described Sepik peoples as possessing an “importing culture” and as long concerned with appraising such exigencies and opportunities [1938].)

For Marshall Sahlins, writing in 1999, these entanglements and articulations were part of “the indigenization of modernity,” the way in which “the experience of capitalism is mediated by the habitus of an indigenous form of life” (1999, ix, xvi).<sup>3</sup> Thus, Sahlins argued that “the Eskimo are still there, and they are still Eskimo” (1999, i). While we do not dispute this, we wonder whether the reverse is true, whether the nature of habitus and hence of experience itself has been correspondingly transformed by capitalism.<sup>4</sup> As we shall see, Chambri encounters with capitalism have demanded serious readjustments in the nature of Chambri habitus. Certainly this is what Sahlins's own analysis of the “structure of the conjuncture” would suggest. As he wrote in his 1985 monograph, *Islands of History*: “Hawaiian culture . . . then changes precisely because, in admitting the world to full membership in its categories, it admits the probability

that the categories will be functionally revalued. The god Lono would no longer be the same concept once Captain Cook was referred to it; nor could the idea of foreign lands, taboos, or the divine in general be sustained the way they were. And, as the given category is revalued in the course of historic reference, so must the relationships between categories change: the structure is transformed” (1985, 31).

On the model of the Eskimo and the Hawaiians, the Chambri are still there and are still Chambri; yet they are definitely and fundamentally not their (grand)fathers’ Chambri. To be sure, they have rights to Chambri land; they likely speak the Chambri language (often managing fewer noun classes than formerly); they presume that they will remain socially significant to one another; and, when the multinational company finally comes to extract oil from Chambri Lake, they will demand recognition as the rightful owners of their (perhaps despoiled) environment. Nevertheless, it must also be said that their hallmark “totemism” is no longer the major focus of male struggles to achieve worth and identity. Few currently have appreciable totemic knowledge; correspondingly, the coordination of the totemic system is seriously diminished, and the prospect of both knowledge and practice being socially reproduced in a way recognizable to (grand)fathers has become decidedly iffy. Of course, as James Clifford made clear in *Returns: Becoming Indigenous in the Twenty-First Century* (2013), recognition of a totemic past might prove politically important and affectively generative for (grand)sons. It might even, as David Akin demonstrated for the mountain Kwaio of Malaita, lead to a hyper-orthodoxy of highly elaborated practices (2014).

In any case, whether contemporary Chambri have been primarily engaged in cultural transformation or augmentation, or likely some mixture of both, they have become less interesting to many of our colleagues and students. Accordingly, we are asked questions about “whither Papua New Guinea?” in today’s anthropology. For example, after a presentation we gave in 2004 about the effects of transnational capitalism on culturally diverse Papua New Guineans, an anthropologist (a non-Melanesianist) inquired critically: “Although Papua New Guinea has brought much of importance to anthropology concerning leadership and economic exchange, what you’re describing could be happening anywhere. What’s coming out of there that’s especially instructive?” In short, to the degree that Papua New Guineans, the Chambri included, are not sharply distinctive, they have lost their special luster.<sup>5</sup> For our interlocutor, since they no longer produced Crapanzano’s defamiliarization, alienation, or self-dis-

tancing—no longer helped us toward “overcoming, or at least recognizing, social constriction and cultural blindness” and a “reevaluation of our respective cultural presumptions” (2003, 4)—they weren’t that interesting.

Of late, the quest for instructive “alterities” has intensified as some anthropologists, those promulgating the “ontological turn,” search for alternatives to the Western perspective that humans appropriately dominate over “nature.” Ghassan Hage, for instance, maintains that the Western perspective giving culture dominance over nature results in global resource depletion and an aversion to radical forms of understanding that might destabilize our destructive way of being in the world (see too Escobar 2008). Indeed, Hage has pointed out that “anthropological works, capturing the plurality of [life]ways . . . have become important resources for a radical ecology in search for alternative forms of human-nature relations” (2012, 295). In so contending, these anthropologists would have us move away from the common understanding that cultures are “systems of belief (concepts, etc.) that provide different perspectives on a single world” (Paleček and Risjord 2013, 3). Rather than many cultures and one world, they would have us accept the startling perspective of many “worlds”—many “natures.” Moreover, to deny this multinaturalism would be an act of epistemological violence wherein “we” have the truth and “others” have cultural assumptions.<sup>6</sup> Focusing largely on the Amazon, where alternative ontologies are said to thrive,<sup>7</sup> these anthropologists postulate a fundamentally different “otherwise” (Povinelli 2012)—and argue that things needn’t be at all the way they are.<sup>8</sup>

We certainly do not wish to hold “the capacity to differ under control,” agreeing with Martin Holbraad, Morten Axel Pedersen, and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2014) that this would be an act of hegemony. And we certainly do not speak as Amazonianists. Yet our experience in Papua New Guinea may give our comments some relevance. After all, Papua New Guinea is often compared to Amazonia (Tuzin and Gregor 2001) and is a place where anthropologists, according to Joel Robbins, once had a “messianic openness to otherness” (2011, 191). However, we worry that emphasizing—whether in Amazonia or in Papua New Guinea—a (supposed) purity of a past otherness would be at the expense of an “ethnography of the actual” (Bond and Bessire 2014, 3). It would diminish acknowledgment that all of us exist in a “shared world of unevenly distributed problems” (Bond and Bessire 2014, 3). It would distract attention from the many predicaments that Papua New Guineans, including the Chambri, currently encounter, both in towns and in their home villages:

inadequate health care (marked by tuberculosis, malaria, and HIV/AIDS), poor schooling, poverty, gender violence, political corruption, drunkenness, crime, and (for some Papua New Guineans) environmental despoliation.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, it would inhibit recognition that many Papua New Guineans, including many Chambri, have long experienced important aspects of their purported “traditional” ontology as oppressive—as, for example, in its validation of the authority of senior males. For their part, Chambri have long been looking around, borrowing what they find useful if not liberating.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps ironically, to escape aspects of this ontology, some Chambri have become evangelical Christians, adopting aspects of our own Judeo-Christian ontology, including the divinely authorized human domination of nature.

Such ethnographies of the actual may be what Sahlins (in his foreword to the English translation of Phillipe Descola’s *Beyond Nature and Culture* [2013]) regarded as a contemporary preoccupation with “diverse anthropological minutiae,” a “cultural flotsam,” reflecting a “present analytical disarray.” Nonetheless, this “cultural flotsam” is, in fact, the content of contemporary people’s lives. These lives, we contend, cannot be placed without violence into what Sahlins (in lauding Descola’s grand schema) described as a “planetary table of the ontological elements and the compounds they produce” (2013, xii–xiii).<sup>11</sup> What is more, we find it plausible that this planetary table of “alter-modern worlds” was itself “discovered by elite scholars” to provide “redemptive inhabitation for the privileged few,” as David Bond and Lucas Bessire would have it (2014, 3). This is to say, as we engage in the celebration of differences, we need to remain politically mindful that differences that make a difference may cut many ways—including differences from the authorized table of ontological differences.

### “CULTURAL FLOTSAM”? SOME HISTORY

In *Twisted Histories, Altered Contexts*, we described the Chambri as entangled in a system of commensurate differences (one linked to that observed by Margaret Mead and Reo Fortune in 1933).<sup>12</sup> Competition among senior men for eminence was relatively open, and differences were a matter of degree, not of kind. Virtually all had some control of totemic power in what was a totemic division of labor; virtually all had some control over marriage arrangements. Contentions about the efficacy of totemic control and the appropriateness of marriage lines took place in

men's house debates filled with dramatic assertion, vivid gesture, offense easily taken, and innuendo about secrets already known and of little value. Under these circumstances, most Chambri men were entangled in a common game, knotted together as contenders in a grand commotion of intertwined cooperation and competition. In effect, this commotion linked it all—environment, economy, sociality, and cosmology—as men jockeyed for political eminence in their coordinated work.

Increasingly, though, this was not the only game going. From the 1930s through the 1950s, some Chambri had left their home villages to work on plantations elsewhere in Papua New Guinea or to train for Catholic mission service. By the early 1960s, greater numbers left, primarily for the coastal town of Wewak. There they supervised children who, having completed the limited schooling available on Chambri Island, attended mission schools in Wewak, or they looked after kin receiving treatment at the Wewak hospital. Eventually, they rented a small area on the edge of town where they built the makeshift houses forming what became Chambri Camp.

By the early 1970s, ever more Chambri traveled to Wewak, generally staying with kin or co-villagers already living in Chambri Camp. Many came to earn money to take or send home. They also came to see what town life was like. Women who came to sell smoked fish might stay several months before returning to Chambri; men, who accompanied them or came alone, might look for jobs and stay longer. If no jobs were found, they eked out a living selling “traditional” carvings and baskets to tourists. They built houses or additions to existing structures from whatever was available—bush materials, scavenged pieces of sheet metal, and even cardboard—and squeezed these in as they could. And many Chambri came to consider Wewak as home.

Few Chambri either living in or visiting Wewak were prosperous, yet the town did provide a glimpse of what Papua New Guinea's political independence (in 1975) was supposed to bring. The promise of “development” had permeated even remote villages. Chambri village youth carefully copied into their school notebooks such sentences as: “When there is development, there is always changes. We must choose the best way to cause the development.” Certainly the Chambri we knew during our 1987 research found Wewak exciting. They encountered Papua New Guineans from many cultural groups, whether through school, work, church, sports, or ambling around town. Some became friends (or antagonists). Some became lovers. Some got married. They visited trade stores well-stocked



with clothing, mattresses, radios, tape recorders, pots, pans, and repair parts for stoves and lamps; supermarkets filled with cases of canned fish, stacks of twenty-five-kilo bags of rice, frozen food, cold soda, and takeout fried foods; bars serving cold beer and providing dart boards and sometimes pool tables; outdoor markets offering varied produce from throughout the province and beyond.

Although unable to afford much, Chambri realized that other Papua New Guineans (no longer simply the “expats”) might actually access coveted consumer items, if only to share with kin and friends. In these ways—augmented by advertising, rebroadcast Australian television programs, conversations with international tourists, and the like—Chambri (and other Papua New Guineans) became increasingly affected by a system of incommensurate differences, one in which differences became more matters of kind than of degree. These were differences of the sort conveyed not just in the caste system of an ebbing colonialism but also in a class system within an increasingly encompassing world system. Under these circumstances, most Chambri felt out of their league, no longer contenders in a common game. In effect, they were increasingly exposed to a new system of stratified difference, one in which valued identity was manifest in a lifestyle requiring money.

If Chambri in Wewak recognized that they were marginal players in what urban life in Papua New Guinea and beyond offered, they at least felt more sophisticated—less backward—than those still on Chambri Island. Indeed, especially for town-dwelling young men and women, there was a sense that “traditional” constraints should yield to youth-focused modernist possibilities: to the potentiality, adventure, and spiritual revitalization of freely chosen entanglements. For their part, Chambri elders, both in town and on Chambri Island, decried town life as undermining proper Chambri patterns of authority, morality, and social entailments more generally. For their part, youths on Chambri Island soon and portentously responded by declaring themselves “young lives” who were entitled to “freedom,” chiefly in making their own marriage choices. The freedom they demanded reflected rankling resentment against the authority of senior males.

By 1994, when we next visited the Chambri in Wewak and on Chambri Island, we continued to explore how young men and women were negotiating the captivating pulls of modernity. In particular, we focused on the appeal of an evangelical Christian youth movement, called Antioch, and of Papua New Guinea’s popular music scene (see Gewertz and Errington



1996; Errington and Gewertz 1996). With socioeconomic change on our minds, during our next visit to Wewak in 1996, we concentrated on the emerging forms of class difference, forms that discriminated against most Chambri. In our 1999 monograph, *Emerging Class in Papua New Guinea*, we noted the initial effects of an important shift in government policy and practice concerning “development.” Faced with increasing budget deficits, the government sought help from the World Bank and International Monetary Fund and, in return, agreed to make the “structural adjustments” required of indebted countries worldwide. Central to these were neoliberal, “user-pay” policies for the likes of health care and education: policies that presented development as market-based with consumers increasingly accountable for obtaining and paying for the services and commodities that would improve their lives. Getting ahead would, thus, be dependent on individual responsibility and striving—entrepreneurship—rather than as a result of government “handouts.” Such policies clearly favored the already well placed and educated, not the rural or the urban marginal.

Our next visit was of a different order. During 1999, we wrote to several Chambri friends that our world had changed profoundly: our daughter, Alexis, had been killed in a bicycle accident. For their part, they insisted that we come to Chambri Island so that they could perform the first part of the *tsem mijanko* ritual designed to “finish a worry” (Gewertz and Errington 2002). After all, they had important claims on Alexis’s memory. Having lived among the Chambri as a child during Deborah’s first fieldwork (1974–75), “she had grown big at the hands of Chambri women,” they said; we must come so as to acknowledge this. Interested and intrigued, touched and moved, we decided to give it a go—to give it our best. Afterward, emerging from experiences both wrenching and satisfying, we sensed that a resting point had been achieved in our long-term relationships with the Chambri. The time had come for new research. Though working elsewhere in Papua New Guinea, we were not to visit Wewak, much less Chambri Island, until fifteen years had passed.

At the time of our return—the end of 2014/beginning of 2015—the shifts we had earlier noted were ongoing. To anticipate major themes in our updated collective biography: Young people had gotten substantially out from under the authority of senior males; concomitantly, the intensity of competition among senior males for prestige in a system of commensurate difference had become muted. Moreover, Chambri—whether on Chambri Island or in Wewak—had become seemingly resigned to the invidious distinctions of class in a system of incommensurate differences.

Indeed, for many, cheerful coping and enjoying (minor) consumer pleasures when possible—generally with other Chambri—was the order of the day. (Young children in Wewak were pacified with instant noodles, fried flour balls, and sometimes K2 notes to hold and suck. [At the time, one kina (K1.00) was worth about US\$.37.]) Overall, and for better or worse, social entanglements seemed more volitional, life less intense.

## ONTOLOGIES ON THE MOVE

Our updated biography—as mentioned, still collective, partial, and unfinished—takes the form of interlocking stories, some long and some short, about the lives of Chambri we have known for some time. Our stories have been crafted so that our “ethnography of the actual” contextualizes the shifting, situational, melded, often self-conscious, and sometimes critically appraised ways of being and acting in the world: ways of deriving value and identity—whether traditional and knowledge-based, emerging class-based, or class-based with neoliberal (entrepreneurial) underpinnings (see Gewertz and Errington 1999; Errington, Fujikura, and Gewertz 2012). Evident, too, are our relationships, some more tangled than others, which both we and Chambri have established and called on.

We see our biographical accounts complementing those in Lal and Luker’s *Telling Pacific Lives* (2008). As with those, we relate personally enhancing stories, convey literacy’s exciting possibilities for personal expression, and consider the creation of specific Melanesian persons. Yet, unlike many of the contributions to their volume, we do not present a given life in its relative completeness. Instead, since our biography is collective, our major objective is to understand the broader and often shifting factors that shape these lives (and, in a minor way, are shaped by them). We seek thus to balance accounts of Chambri lives with accounts of the varied contexts—local, regional, national, and global contexts—in which these lives are taking place.

In effect, we elaborate on Melissa Demian’s characterization of the “myriad vernacular forms of efficacious action” characteristic of contemporary Papua New Guinea: what she dubs “the mix” (2015, 98). In our case, we find multiple “mixes,” varying over time. Correspondingly, we also find useful Chris Ballard’s discussion of “historicities,” the historically located frames shaping cultural understandings of the likely course of life, both personal and collective. As such, historicities shape objectives, providing “the bases for the very real decisions and actions of historical

or contemporary actors” (Ballard 2014, 111). Ballard’s essay continues in language suggesting structures of conjunctures: “Groups and individuals operating under the terms and precepts of different historicities come into contact, but the historicities on either side are transformed in the process of encounter” (2014, 111). As the stories below convey, mixes and historicities all lead to a fair amount of indeterminacy in the actions and objectives of variously located Chambri. Nevertheless, recognizing this indeterminacy is hardly the same as floundering in “cultural flotsam,” referring again to Sahlins (2013, xii).

*Patrick Yarapat—among the last of the “traditional” big men, once widely feared for his assertiveness: Now dead (at the age of 68 in 2008), with just the posts of his large multifamily house still standing, many of his ritual powers dispersed, his men’s house in shambles, and his networks fragmented.*

We learned details about Patrick’s death from Sebi Yarapat, the only one of Patrick’s sons still living on Chambri Island (in fact, the only one living in the East Sepik Province). We last saw Patrick in 1999, when, shouldering his way into a major ritual role at our daughter’s *tsem mijanko*, he was at the absolute top of his performative game: arriving in full traditional kit of feathers, foliage and other finery, engaged in fancy footwork, and blowing a whistle with every step, Yarapat was the embodiment of a Chambri big man, literally strutting his stuff. (A picture can be found of him thus attired in Gewertz and Errington [2002].)

When Sebi invited us to share food with his family and some neighbors in his nuclear family-focused house (about a third of the size of Patrick’s house), he explained that he was carrying on his father’s tradition of welcoming guests. Others had described Sebi as a sober, responsible, industrious householder (with a small business of selling D cell batteries and other necessities). He was unlike the unfortunately more typical, idle young Chambri men who, indifferent to the exhortations of their elders and seemingly without plans for the future, spent their time and money consuming marijuana and the locally distilled alcohol known as “steam.” (Ironically, many of these young men were hanging out in a partially collapsed cultural museum, a failed attempt prompted by outside influence to give youth direction by engaging them with their cultural heritage.)

After eating, we all looked through a copy of *Twisted Histories, Altered Contexts*, a copy that Sebi inherited from Patrick. We had sent it to Patrick

because it contained a photograph of him performing the totemic ritual by which his patriclan, as descendants of Saun (a principal ancestor who took the form of an egret), controlled the annual rise and fall of Chambri Lake. Sebi then brought out the heirloom *mwai* mask, evident in the photograph, which depicted Saun. Deborah mentioned that she had a reproduction of this mask that Patrick had carved. Yes, Sebi said, tourists had frequently purchased these. Unfortunately, even in Patrick's lifetime, the tourist trade had ceased. (With the global recession and Papua New Guinea's reputation as a dangerous place, the Melanesian Discoverer [through the Papua New Guinea-based Melanesian Tourist Service] no longer had clientele for its expensive Sepik River cruises.) Once, virtually all Chambri men would be productively involved in carving artifacts for sale, working under their houses in small groups, with the skills of older men on display for younger men to emulate. Now, with few buyers, there was little point in carving. Sebi and his Chambri guests agreed that Chambri men had lost an important activity, a source of income, and an aspect of their identity.<sup>13</sup>

Concerning Patrick's *mwai* mask, Sebi and his brothers had been offered a lot of money since it was the real thing. Valuing it too much to sell, Sebi nonetheless lacked the secret names to activate it ritually. Typically and problematically, his father had held on to the secret names and his consequent powers until the very last, transmitting little of his ritual knowledge to his sons. The loss of such secret names—and not from his clan alone—was evident, Sebi thought, in the undeniable changes in Chambri Lake. The floating grass islands, the water lilies, and the shoreline grass fringe had disappeared, and the increased winds and waves often made fishing and boat transport difficult. To be sure, an introduced and vegetatively destructive fish—a relative of the piranha, called *pacu*—contributed to these changes. Nevertheless, if ritual controls had been in place, the consequences—primarily of wind and wave action—would have been limited. Indeed, Chambri ritual power more generally had been dispersed. “Nature” (seemingly, by this time, a separate domain) was, Sebi said, now largely on its own, regulating itself according to its own patterns. No one seemed able to consolidate and hold as much power as when Patrick, in concert with other practitioners, regulated the Chambri environment.

There was some discussion that power might be reconsolidated with the recent return to Chambri of “Emosuie's *bilum*,” a sacred bundle of ritual paraphernalia belonging to Chambri's apical ancestor. During 1975, a member of Patrick's extended family had placed this bundle, along with water lilies from Chambri Lake, in a pond in front of Port Moresby's



FIGURE 1 Sebi Yarapat holding Patrick's ancestral *mwai* mask, 13 January 2015, Indingai Village, Chambri Island, Papua New Guinea. Photo by Frederick Errington.

newly constructed National Parliament House—this to bolster the power of Sepik-born Michael Somare, Papua New Guinea's first (and recurrent) prime minister. However, times had changed. Evangelical Christians powerful in Parliament were now purging all the "satanic" objects donated by numerous groups. While Chambri had been pleased that their ancestral power had fostered Sepik interests at the national level, they were happy to get the *bilum* back.

Patrick had himself earlier shifted his ritual practice to incorporate Christian power (as we describe in *Twisted Histories, Altered Contexts*). He had widely claimed to be often visited by Jesus, with whom he had first conversed, in the Chambri language, on 17 August 1991 at 3:00 AM. Based on this new relationship, he decided to exercise his totemic prerogatives



by relying more on the reliable medium of the Holy Spirit and less on the complicated evocations of ancestral power. Unfortunately, according to Sebi, another Chambri—a hardcore traditionalist—had subsequently convinced Patrick to return to his earlier reliance on ancestral power alone. Jesus, resenting Patrick's apostasy, became a wrathful God—afflicting him with a boil that, when scratched, resulted in Patrick's precipitous decline.<sup>14</sup>

*Lucy Sai—the first modern Chambri businesswoman: Now 50 years old, married, and thriving on Chambri Island, with a house made of permanent materials built on her father's land and using a number of income streams.*

When Alexis Gewertz lived as a child on Chambri, Lucy Sai was her best friend. They met again when, in 1983, Alexis returned briefly as a teenager. By then, Lucy had borne Bobby and, as we wrote in *Cultural Alternatives and a Feminist Anthropology* (1987), Alexis wondered how it was possible that Lucy's adolescent sexual experience and the birth of her child could have occurred with so little personal or social upheaval. (There's a picture of the three of them in the book.) Lucy was then living primarily in Wewak, where she seemed quite happy. With the help of her sister—an unmarried, salaried teacher—she had enough money to feed herself and her young son; she did expect to marry but was not concerned that she be in love with her husband.

By 1999, Lucy had returned to the village for good after marrying Bobby's father, Robert. Present at Alexis's death ritual, we were too preoccupied to converse much with her. By 2014, Lucy and Robert had moved from a house of traditional materials built on his patriclan land to a house of permanent materials that Lucy, with the help of her sister, built on their father's land. Although his clan wasn't happy with the couple's move, as it went against patrilocal practices, Robert did value tradition and was helping clan members build a new men's house. We were impressed when he showed us a group of (truly spectacular) ancestral masks, once kept hidden, especially from women, which would reside there. (We were enjoined to advertise this men's house and its masks on the Internet, promising visitors an authentic cultural experience.)

Lucy herself has had several bad patches with Robert. Once during a fight, he hit her and knocked out some teeth. Now she jokes about having a dental implant, using the teeth of a *pacu*. With its formidable dentition, the *pacu* has not only de-vegetated the lake; it has been des-



FIGURE 2 Lucy Sai holding a small *pacu*, 2 January 2015, Indingai Village, Chambri Island, Papua New Guinea. Photo by Frederick Errington.



ignated the “ball cutter.” Thus equipped, Lucy said, she could really get even were Robert ever to hit her again. She has also been disappointed that Bobby remained in Wewak, despite her promise to build him a house if he returned to Chambri Island. He had married a Chambri woman who had grown up in town and wanted nothing to do with the work of island subsistence. Moreover, Bobby was unemployed and just hanging on.

At the moment, though, Lucy and Robert were enjoying a good life. They were proud of their distinctly upscale residence—and potential guesthouse, if tourism were ever to pick up. They owned a motorboat, initially financed by Lucy’s sister, with which they transported passengers between Chambri Island and the Government Patrol Post at Pagwi, where the Sepik Highway leading to Wewak began. Business was good because many Chambri women marketed smoked fish at Maprik, a market center along the highway. There, within a regional agricultural economy in which people were short on protein and sufficient in money, eager customers bought fish both for personal consumption and for resale into the hinterland. Even after transportation and other expenses, an enterprising Chambri woman could clear several hundred kina (K) on each trip to Maprik. (As Mead noted in 1933, Chambri women were commercially inclined.) Lucy herself engaged in this trade. She bought several Chambri women fishnets, and she augmented the fish she caught with a share of theirs.

Lucy and Robert operated a thriving trade store as well. Her sister sent goods from Wewak—instant noodles, rice, lighters, cell phone top-up cards (for the now virtually ubiquitous cell phones), batteries, and biscuits. Lucy spoke to us with glee about the wonders of “markups” with, for example, lighters going at her store for K1 when they cost about half that in Maprik and top-up cards for K4 or K5 when they cost K3 in Wewak. Sharing profits with her sister, she still had enough to buy what she wished, most recently contracting for a nicely constructed native-materials cookhouse, which doubled as her store. She told us with a sense of entrepreneurial accomplishment about staying up on New Year’s Eve until 5:00 AM when her stock of Doop, small bottles (175 ml) of dark rum, finally ran out. She didn’t want to miss a single sale. She agreed that the night had been noisy with revelers drunk on what she supplied, along with local “steam.” Fortunately, Robert, a big forceful guy, was able to protect her and her premises.

Doing well enough, Lucy planned to do better once she discovered an international market for the “lightning stones,” likely worth millions; these, she either found or purchased from others in the area ignorant of their real worth. Although we were dubious when pressed for our opin-

ion about what struck us as small pieces of quartz rather than rare gemstones, she seemed willing to suspend our disbelief, concluding that they might still represent a business opportunity. In addition, she made a business opportunity of what was, in effect, a “traditional” (and increasingly optional) exchange. This was a *cambio*, wherein a gift from a mother’s brother (often unsolicited and sometimes unwelcome) must be generously recompensed by his sister’s child. For instance, when Lucy’s mother’s brother killed a crocodile he had raised for its skin and gave her the carcass, she provided the generous counter-prestation of K200. Then, in a blend of custom and capitalism, she added value by smoking and selling bits and pieces of the meat to earn much of her money back.

Clearly, Lucy enjoyed her eminence and being in the center of things. She was proud of her house, which Robert regarded as the single sign of “development” on Chambri Island. She was pleased to show us her success and to celebrate our mutual history. She called Deborah “mommy” and attributed her prosperity as a businesswoman to Deborah’s example of shielding resources from the leveling claims of others. And she had her copy of *Cultural Alternatives and a Feminist Anthropology* on display for visitors so they could see the picture of Alexis, Bobby, and her.

*Godfried Kolly—self-nominated and one-of-a-kind “traditional anthropologist,” long engaged in indigenous modernization: Now dead (at 56 in 2007), leaving many traces of his attempts to synergize the new and the changing with the old and the abiding.*

Godfried Kolly’s numerous enthusiasms had long influenced our research. He was the son of Deborah’s immensely well-informed senior informant, Andrew Tambwi Kwolikumbwi Yorundu, to whom we dedicated *Twisted Histories, Altered Contexts*. Godfried worked as Deborah’s motorboat driver during her earliest visit to Chambri. He then worked as our research assistant both on Chambri Island and in Wewak, which had become his primary residence. Eventually calling himself a “traditional anthropologist,” in 1987 he dedicated himself to writing the “Chambri Bible.” (This, as with all of his writing, was in Neo-Melanesian.) To this end, he collected and recorded numerous traditional stories about Chambri ancestral figures in order to demonstrate their correspondence with biblical stories and characters. His was a grand synthetic effort at indigenizing modernity and vice versa: one that sought to merge traditional wisdom with European understandings in creating a new power/knowledge structure.

Subsequently, Godfried registered as a “mastercrafts person” with the East Sepik Provincial Department of Tourism and Culture. Describing himself in his application as an expert in dancing, carving, and painting, he also stated that his research experience with us had made him proficient in collecting and transcribing traditional stories. Given these skills, he sought funds from various government officials to purchase an out-board motor, fuel, two amplifiers, one generator, three microphones, and a mixer. His goal was to travel throughout the Middle Sepik, together with other members of the Yambai Culture Group of which he was president, in order to “teach all the young people to learn their traditional dances; they will see how we Chambri perform ours and this will please them and cause them to follow their own traditions.” Unfortunately, this project didn’t get off the ground. However, Godfried did have some eventual success as a cultural performer, touring London, Amsterdam, and Paris in 1990 with a troupe of Papua New Guinean musicians. At the same time, he pursued his town-focused interests. Most notably, he became a soccer referee, gaining “Level 3” certification to preside over local matches with the hope of eventually qualifying for international matches.

Living an economically marginal life in Wewak’s Chambri Camp, he remained excited at prospects but increasingly frustrated by outcomes. In 1996, he rebuked us. He acknowledged that we had helped him, providing money for his work as a traditional anthropologist and gifts of soccer paraphernalia, such as official (Fox 40) whistles. Yet our support had not “opened roads” for him. He was not gaining sponsorship for his cultural group. He was unable to leverage his prestations of whistles into ongoing socialities with his mostly more affluent (if not middle-class) fellow referees. In effect, despite his best efforts, he was just not able to compel commitment from these important others in a wider and increasingly class-based system.

His disappointment with us notwithstanding, Godfried’s optimism returned and we parted on good terms. He continued to send us stories he transcribed and reports about Chambri events, including deaths of those we had known. Certainly, we were moved and grateful when, in imbuing the feast food for Alexis’s 1999 death ritual with counter-sorcery spells, Godfried included her in a list of Chambri dead to be answered for.

In 2007, Godfried died (according to the death certificate) of “advanced mouth cancer.” We had known about the illness and had sent money to help with expenses. Arriving in Wewak in 2014, we paid our respects to Godfried’s wife (the last of a succession of three), two of his daughters

(plus several grandkids), and his paternal half-sister. Despite our contributions, Godfried's death had seriously depleted the family's resources. They were hanging on precariously, largely through the κ100 the one employed daughter earned fortnightly by filleting tuna on the night shift at Wewak's fish processing plant.

During our condolence call, we met Godfried again in a moving way. He had left things for us, we were told. Taking us into his room, his family unlocked a chest with the key Godfried had provided when death was imminent. In it was an inventory of his life, including the part we shared. There was the rusted portable typewriter he kept for us, the bullhorn we sent him, photographs from his trip to Europe, instructional pamphlets collected over the years, letters from Deborah, and a dedicated copy of *Emerging Class in Papua New Guinea*.

In addition, we found hundreds of handwritten pages. There were accounts of debts owed to and incurred by him. There were lists of secret names and ritual prerogatives possessed by his clan. There was a carefully drawn family tree depicting his descendants from each of his three wives. There were traditional Chambri stories, perhaps ultimately intended for us. There were originals of letters faxed to various business interests and politicians (including to several prime ministers) requesting sponsorship. There were descriptions of matches at which he performed as a soccer referee. There were many documents detailing wrongs against him and sometimes others in his family (including a seventeen-page account of an assault on a daughter), all written to claim compensation if not legal redress. In addition, there were many documents detailing infractions he witnessed while an auxiliary policeman, as when several youth taunted a woman by cutting down her flowers. (That in pursuing his urban opportunities he had become an auxiliary policeman did not surprise us.) Finally, as he lay dying, he listed those whose grudges might have prompted the sorcery that was killing him. Principal contenders—a mixed group of those with traditional and more modernist grievances—were those he had charged in the assault on his daughter, fellow soccer referees envious of his successes, and one or more of his jealous former wives, each striking out at the others through him.

The chest also contained the commemorative pamphlet distributed at Alexis's memorial service in Boston that we had sent him along with a letter in which Deborah had answered his questions about the particulars of her death, specifically about whether she had enemies whose magic might have fatally distracted her attention or the attention of the driver of the truck that had hit her.

*Francis Yimbang—decent, resilient, and socially adept: Now 68 years old, living primarily in Wewak with his wife, and engaged in the enterprise of “money making money” through short-term loans, he lives surrounded by daughters, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren along with a scattering of adult males—one of his patrilineage and the others “connected” to the women as fathers to some of their children.*

Deborah first met Francis in 1974 at the Patrol Post at Pagwi (located, as mentioned, at the juncture of the Sepik Highway and the Sepik River). He was working as a motorboat driver for the Gaui Local Government Council (GLGC), a local-level form of representational democracy inaugurated by Australia as Papua New Guinea was transitioning into independence. Deborah was visiting Pagwi with her family (Alexis and Alexis’s biological father) to consult patrol reports prior to picking a field site. As it happened, Francis, his wife Scola, and their (then) three children, Rudolf, Tiameri, and Angela, were her immediate neighbors and she got to know them well.

Where Deborah would center her research became a matter of interest not only to them but to Scola’s brother, Matias Yambumpe. Matias, then GLGC president, became insistent that Deborah live on Chambri Island. As a white person, she would have an outboard motor and other resources. Moreover, if she went to Chambri, he could take credit for having “pulled” her there, attesting to his ability to influence white people. To this end, he enlisted Francis and Scola. They found a house on Chambri Island for Deborah and her family, one strategically located on Francis’s clan land and in Matias’s home village. And, still at Pagwi, Francis convinced Godfried Kolly of an opportunity: rather than seeking his fortune elsewhere, he should offer Deborah his services as a motorboat driver.

Matias, for his part, was to claim a special relationship with Deborah. For instance, he pressed her to write his biography, in order to document his leadership among the Chambri, his GLGC prominence, and his election to the National Parliament after the country’s independence in 1975. Additionally, this biography would demonstrate Prime Minister Michael Somare’s reliance on Matias. It had been Matias, in fact, who had brought Emosuie’s *bilum* as well as the water lilies from Chambri Lake to the Parliament House pond to augment Somare’s Sepik-based power. The biography would attest to Matias’s cosmopolitan efficacy by describing his trip to New York when he addressed the United Nations concerning an ecosystemic disaster: an introduced aquatic fern undermining Sepik subsistence

by clogging waterways. Matias would repeatedly recount this trip, including his summoning Deborah from Amherst to escort him through New York City and show him its many wonders. (These included the elevators in the World Trade Towers, which brought him atop a building so tall that planes flew below.)

These circumstances—some fortuitous and some strongly determined—of finding an anthropological home have continued to resonate through our professional work. Over our many trips to Chambri Island, we have remained close to Francis and Scola, residing in houses on Francis's patri-clan land. In Deborah's 1983 book *Sepik River Societies*, for example, she described treating their oldest child's bone-deep tropical ulcer. Rudolf's ulcer had become the focus of a broad spectrum of treatments: exorcisms and applications of holy water by the Chicago-born, resident priest; poultices, incantations, divinations, and counter-sorcery spells by local and regional adepts; and antibiotics by Deborah. Fortunately, Rudolf recovered and prospered. He did well in school (with Deborah's help with school fees), graduating from Lae's University of Technology and, eventually, from Reading University in the United Kingdom with an MSc degree in agriculture. Now a senior agricultural scientist at the Kimbe Headquarters of New Britain Palm Oil, he is appreciated by his family for his exemplary financial support and for his hospitality on their often prolonged visits.

For their part, it was Francis and Scola who, in 1999, hosted the multi-stage *tsem mijanko* for Alexis. Supervised by Scola (who, as Deborah's "sister," was deemed of Alexis's maternal line), the ritual was complex and exhausting. It assembled and compensated those who had provided for Alexis, whether with food or ritual protection. It involved women—including Deborah, Scola, and others—gathering to sing poignant mourning songs about their own lost loved ones. It involved men—including Fred, Francis, Godfried, and others—gathering to listen as sacred flutes summoned ancestors to welcome Alexis. Patrick Yarapat, as mentioned earlier, played a commanding role, escorting Alexis's spirit to the men's house of those deemed her paternal line. There, briefly residing on the bench reserved for her patri-kin, she received ancestral recognition. Finally, her spirit, floating on a tiny raft into Chambri Lake, was released. In these ways, the entanglements defining Alexis as a living person were dissolved. The social books balanced, our worry was formally "finished." Although private grief might abide, we would be more composed since there were no further obligations concerning our daughter. Given new

names and new clothes, we were to continue without her. (See Gewertz and Errington 2002.)

We remained in touch with Francis and his family but did not see him again until we visited Wewak in December 2014. Always crowded, Chambri Camp was especially full during the Christmas holidays with many Chambri living elsewhere returning home, whether to Wewak or Chambri Island itself. Space at a premium, we were glad to stay with Francis in his native-materials house. Typical of many in the settlement, it was jammed up against its neighbors and packed with people related in various ways.

Living in this house was, of course, Francis and sometimes Scola. She generally shuttled between Chambri Island and Wewak (however, at the time of our visit, she was recuperating from illness with Rudolf at Kimbe). In addition, their daughter, Angela, and her six children were present. Angela's second husband came and went as his construction job allowed. Angela's eldest daughter, Salome, was resident along with her two children and their father Elijah. (No bride price had been paid, a situation Francis described as "boyfriend, girlfriend.") Desmond, Francis and Scola's youngest son, lived there too; his two children and their mother remained on Chambri Island. (Desmond had paid no bride price and Francis contemplated bringing the two children into his clan by paying their mother K2,000 for her "hard work" in childbearing and rearing.) Finally, there was Francis and Scola's youngest child, Rafaela, and her son. (Francis was uncertain about the relationship between Rafaela and the West New Britain father of her child; certainly no bride price had been paid.)

Thus, Francis had become head of a mixed (and, it must be said, lively) household composed of women who should have married out, provisional husbands who should have paid bride price and then taken their wives away with them, and a thirty-two-year-old son who had yet to establish his own household. All, a kindred really, were aggregated around a resource base that was the physical house plus a modest income provided largely through the marketing activity of Angela (who sold wraps of fried fish and sago adorned with jaunty sprigs of green onion); the occasional remittances from Rudolf and another brother (who was a high school teacher); the earnings of Angela's sometimes employed husband; and some of the profits from Francis's enterprise of making short-term loans. Food was exclusively purchased at the local market or in stores. Children much preferred rice to "traditional" sago. Snacks as pacifiers were ubiqui-



tous. Whining kids were, as mentioned, quieted with  $\kappa 2$  notes (which they fondled and sometimes put in their mouths).

We were happy to leave Wewak for Chambri Island, as the Christmas holiday season was celebrated both day and night with blaring music, interspersed with shouts and screams as falling-down-drunk young men and women partied. After arranging with Francis that he accompany us and agreeing that we would pay his way and those of a small entourage of family members, we left on an uncomfortable, albeit uneventful, trip.

Once on Chambri Island, Francis continued to look after us, moving into an adjacent room in Lucy's guesthouse. Each morning, we shared our breakfast with him. Then, in the evening, we conversed about the day's activities and about our lives. He filled us in about the repairs he was making to a house on his clan land in which his eldest daughter, Tiameri, and her six children were living: with no adult men about to fix things—Tiameri's husband was living elsewhere with his second wife—the house



FIGURE 3 Angela Yimbang holding a sago-fish wrap to be sold at market, 18 December 2014, Chambri Camp, Wewak, Papua New Guinea. Photo by Frederick Errington.

was in bad shape. And he kept us apprised of his daily phone conversations with Scola, whose health was improving and who looked forward to returning to her work with various Catholic women's organizations. Although Francis was himself an actively practicing Catholic—indeed, one of the relatively few men in the greatly diminished congregation who attended mass on Chambri Island—he joked about her religious fervor: She had so much religious literature that, when she died, he would have to dig another grave to accommodate it all.

During one of our evening chats, Deborah asked Francis how he had become a motorboat driver. His answer conveyed the caprices of colonial privilege (if not, colonial pathologies) and of Chambri grievances. He said he had been taken from his Chambri Island classroom by the resident (German) priest and teacher with the promise of a better school in Wewak. Instead, he was taught to operate outboard motors, primarily to transport catechists and nursing sisters bringing the Bible and health services to remote villages. Dissatisfied with the paltry mission pay, he became a motorboat driver for the colonial government. After years of good service, an event occurred that still baffled him by its injustice. Summoned to the District Office, he was suddenly punched in the face by a strange white man. (Perhaps Francis was thought to have overstepped his place as a native.) Because he fought back, he was arrested and then fired without a pension. His appeal went nowhere. Now he attributes it all to “black magic” instigated by a Chambri woman because he helped care for a child her husband had adopted against her wishes.

For our part, we told him what we had learned and often asked his advice about what constituted reasonable and unreasonable requests for (generally financial) assistance. We asked, for instance, how to deal with a former research assistant who claimed that we owed her a substantial sum because she had been told as much in a dream (as we shall describe later), and more troubling, about how best to assist an old friend terminally ill with tuberculosis.

*Four young people—about whose hopes for the future we inquired during 1994: Now that their lives have unfolded, we bring their stories up-to-date.*<sup>15</sup>

*Agnes Alatip*

When we first met Agnes in 1994, she was an unmarried 19-year-old resident of Chambri Camp who had to leave high school after her second

year. Partly to gain a sense of direction, she had joined the evangelical Antioch Catholic youth organization. There she had embraced a personalized relationship with a Universalist God. As she wrote in her “testimonial of commitment” for her induction into Antioch (in translation from Neo-Melanesian), she learned “to be proud that I’m special because God first visualized and then made me. I am the way I am because of God and I thank him for making me that way. I am not a robot woman made of discarded pieces of metal. . . . I have life and I have blood and God gave me this body to do his work.” Recognizing that, as a school-leaver, she couldn’t become a banker, she thought she might become a policewoman. Whatever she decided to do, Jesus would be important in her life because he had helped her find equanimity.

At 39, Agnes was living on Chambri Island. She never became a policewoman. Her mother’s brother, himself a policeman, prohibited this: Discovering a prisoner who had hanged himself in his cell, he concluded that this was not a job for a woman. Agnes married according to appropriate kinship precedents and with a considerable bride price. Since then, she had two children, whom she has supported through selling smoked fish at Maprik. Her husband proved abusive and she was seeking a divorce so as to marry another Chambri with whom she was openly having an affair. Still a committed evangelical, though no longer a member of Antioch (which failed to bring her long-term peace), she knew that God would uphold her right to choose a husband she loved. Unfortunately, neither her family nor her husband’s family wished to dissolve the marriage alliance; as well, her family would find it difficult to return the bride price. Thus, it has been hard for her to go on, especially as she feared that she and her lover would be subject to sorcery.

### *August Soway*

Deborah had known August since he was a baby. In 1994, he was an unmarried 22-year-old. The son of the first successful trade-store owner on Chambri Island, he had been sent to Wewak, where we were then living, to replenish his father’s stock. While staying in Chambri Camp, a case of beer, a case of canned mackerel, and case of cooking oil were stolen from him by other Chambri, including a very close relative—his own mother’s brother’s son. Immediately after the theft, August told us in distress that he intended to live his future as a “white man”—as someone beholden to, and trusting of, no one. Much to his relief, Chambri rallied around him and compensation was paid. However, he also told

us on several occasions that he favored amending Chambri custom. For instance, his and his father's future—mostly as it pertained to their business—would be brighter if they (and other Chambri) were not obligated to disperse large sums of money on expensive funerals, initiations, marriages, and the like, and if they could own and develop land individually, rather than as members of large kinship groups.

At 42, living on Chambri Island and working as a motorboat driver, he still helped his father with the trade store and has expanded the family enterprise into crocodile farming. Although married appropriately with the payment of bride price, he and his wife were living apart and he was trying to extricate himself from the marriage. In speaking to us about noteworthy local changes, he pointed out that most of the big residential houses were gone and only a single men's house remained. Significantly, with few tourists, there was no point in carving artifacts. Young men had nothing to do. All they wanted was to be given money by their fish-selling mothers for "steam" and marijuana. Moreover, they were using "black magic" so that their enemies would lose all restraint when drunk and get into trouble. Community leaders did likewise. They were "corrupt." There was no solidarity. Previously, a man like Tambwi (Godfried Kolly's knowledgeable father, mentioned earlier) had controlled the "nail fish" (catfish) with his totemic powers; others controlled something else. They had all worked together. There was "unity." Now people were using powers perversely by, for example, making the wind too strong for fishing and then demanding money to calm the waters. Those doing this were not even the people who should have these powers. They had bought them from their true owners, for purposes of extortion.

### *Jonna Parep*

Jonna helped us in 1994 with a census of her Chambri village. As a 23-year-old, married resident of Chambri Island, she was a devoted supporter of the Legion of Mary, a Catholic organization whose members fervently prayed for the sick and troubled. When asked about her future, she said that, when her six children were older, she wanted freedom to travel, perhaps as a member of a cultural performance group. Until then, she hoped that her many overseas friends—those who had visited Chambri as tourists and with whom she corresponded—would send her the presents she had asked for, in return for the baskets she had woven and sent them. According to the note she slipped us as we were leaving Chambri Island, she wanted (in translation from Neo-Melanesian) "a little wrist-watch

and a radio cassette. I want both of these things. You can send the wrist-watch airmail. The radio cassette you can bring with you when you come next time. . . . I want a JVC or a National Panasonic. A big radio, I don't want it; I want one of the nice, really small ones."

In 2015, we again met Jonna, now 45 years old. She and her husband visited us at Lucy Sai's house to convey a dream, as previously mentioned. When Jonna was dreaming of the notebook Deborah had given her in 1994 to write her life's story, her long-dead paternal uncle suddenly appeared to her. He signed his name in this notebook five times, signifying his approval of her life. Underneath his signatures, he drew a symbol, which she wrote down on awakening. Asking for a piece of paper, she reproduced it for us: a diamond shape followed by a strange number: 15  $\Xi$  142. From the dream, she surmised that Deborah would provide her with this sum of money. She had previously discussed the dream and its number with the Catholic bishop in Wewak; while unclear of its meaning, he did not discount its importance.

### *Soli Pasap*

In 1994, Soli was an unmarried, 24-year-old unemployed Chambri, living in Wewak at Chambri Camp. He neither knew the Chambri language nor the name of his marriage moiety—facts that only mildly embarrassed him. When we asked him whether he, nonetheless, felt like a Chambri, he expressed incredulity: "What else would I be?" He continued that, if he weren't a Chambri, he would have to buy a cultural identity because everyone in Papua New Guinea had one. In response to our questions about his future and with our encouragement, he wrote (in English):

I as an individual will be a future leader of my home community, my family and my future life. As Papua New Guinea is a democratic country, I have all the authority over my life. I will choose my own partner who I know would be the right one for my future and the well-being of our children and ourselves as parents. In my future life I have always planned to live a simple life. I will have just enough to build a permanent house, buy food and clothes for the family and school fees for the kids. That I will have. I as an individual don't want to be a person that everyone would look upon as they would a rich person with a lot of money. I've learned much from the past years and proven to myself that people with a lot of money face lots of problems, such as drinking alcohol every day, husbands busting up their wives, going around with other women and many more things.





FIGURE 4 Deborah Gewertz being shown Soli Pasap's keyboard-adorned grave by his kinsmen, Robert Pantu, 10 January 2015, Wombun Village, Chambri Island, Papua New Guinea. Photo by Frederick Errington.

As well, he told us that he hoped his career as keyboard player for the interethnic, pop-gospel group “Shalom”—a group that often played at Antioch events—would flourish because, like many of his peers, he was “very music-minded.”

In 2014, we visited his father in Wewak and learned that Soli, who had become an ambulance driver for the health department, had died during 2013. His death certificate indicated pneumonia, though everyone knew that the real cause was ensorcellment by a jealous rival. Soli had broken up with his first wife, for whom no bride price had been paid, and had taken up with the divorced wife of a former friend. The sorcerer coveted both women and, with the help of the former wife, “poisoned” Soli. Soli was buried on clan land on Chambri Island. When we visited his grave during 2015, we were moved to see that an electronic keyboard graced the headstone.

*And*

*Alexis Gewertz Shepard*

Our 28-year-old daughter had been put to rest by the Chambri a year after her death. In 2015, however, several people we knew well reopened the case. Notebooks in hand, they interviewed us anew about her death. We had known that Chambri were troubled that the two of us had neither seen her dead body nor had photographs of it. They, therefore, lacked the evidence necessary to diagnose the sorcery that had undoubtedly led to her death. This time they argued that the absence of this evidence suggested she was still alive. They were convinced—and this, we learned, was widely held, matter-of-fact knowledge—that she had been kidnapped, likely abused, and held where we would never find her. Perhaps after thirty years, someone might discover her bones by accident. On TV and in videos they had seen such things take place. (We later learned that Hitron cable service in Papua New Guinea screened programs like *CSI* [Crime Scene Investigation] and *Closed Case Files* on its “Crime and Investigation” channel.) Nominated as kidnappers were members of her biological father’s line or members of her husband’s line; there may, Chambri thought, have been an affinal conflict between the two groups. In any case, they insisted that her fate would remain unknown during her lifetime. She had “forever gone loose,” something they assured us wouldn’t likely happen in a small place like Papua New Guinea.

## ONTOLOGICAL BRICOLAGE

As our stories reveal, the Chambri we have known over the years are still Chambri—they do not, after all, lose track of one another. Plus, as Soli Pasap put it, they can’t imagine being anything else. (They are definitely not their Sepik neighbors, the Iatmul, from whom they have maintained distinction, while sharing much.)<sup>16</sup> They are also Chambri caught up in and actively contributing to ramifying structures of ongoing conjunctures, ones—including those we have conveyed—that have long carried a range of ontological implications.

Employing mixes and shaped by historicities—engaging in efficacious actions in pursuit of historically shaped and shifting objectives—Chambri have been exploring a spectrum of life’s possibilities: whether of value, identity, pleasure, or survival. Thus they are difficult to characterize in any single frame of reference, including that of the “savage slot.” Are



they still totemists, evoking ancestral powers linking them to animal species and other aspects of what we “naturalists” call the environment? Are they Evangelical Christians, believing in an all-powerful and universalistic God who loves them as individuals? Are they mainstream Catholics, attending Mass only rarely? Are they like Jesus or Job? Are they entrepreneurial capitalists, making profit through markups, short-term loans, and the buying and selling of totemic power? Are they strongly motivated consumers, pacifying children with K2 notes and coveting commodities designed for those at the bottom of the pyramid? Are they leading lives of chronic insecurity, the precariat on the fish factory’s night shift? Are they socially constructed? Are they young lives yearning to be free? Are they even patrilocal, much less patrilineal?

Many slide in and out of these multiple frames of reference as they try to manage their lives: this, as mentioned, in the face of inadequate health care, poor schooling, poverty, gender violence, political corruption, drunkenness, crime, alienated youth, and the possibility of environmental despoliation. (It should be noted that they are fortunate not to be among the abject—the most “tristes,” referring again to Sahlins [1993], of our modern world system.) Certainly there is friction, often manifested, as we have seen, by jealousy and sorcery bringing on untimely death. But, to the best of our understanding and as reflected by our brief, necessarily incomplete ethnography of the actual, we see little of the uneasy co-existence between distinct cultural logics—frames of reference—that Robbins found among the Urapmin (2004), wherein a traditional, relational sociality duelled with a modern, Christian, individualist one. (The sharp distinction Robbins found may be a function of the relatively short time the Urapmin had engaged with Europeans and their Christian ontology.)

What we see, instead, is a grab bag of possibilities, both “traditional” and “modern,” rural and urban, by which Chambri deal with various exigencies and become Chambri of various sorts.<sup>17</sup> And what has so engaged us about them as we have become entangled in their lives is precisely that they are neither anomic nor concerned with ontological purity. Rather, they are bricoleurs, finding satisfaction, if not pleasure, in making it work, generally in the company of other Chambri, at least for a time.

\* \* \*

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## Notes

- 1 We thank Jonathan Friedman for the instructive wordplay in the final phrase.
- 2 There were, of course, earlier and sometimes violent contacts, generally with coastal groups. See, as just one source, Corris 1968.
- 3 Compare Tambiah 2000 and Knauf 2002.
- 4 *Habitus* refers to those bodily skills, styles, tastes, and assumptions that compose the taken-for-granted within a social system.
- 5 Moreover, from the questioner's North American geopolitical perspective, they were politically peripheral, if not irrelevant. After all, why read about Papua New Guinea when you could learn the same sort of thing about Latin American neighbors?
- 6 See, especially, Escobar 2008 and Kohn 2013.
- 7 For perhaps the seminal work, see Viveiros de Castro 1998.
- 8 To explore some of the byways they take in making this argument, see Bond and Bessire 2014 and Bessire and Bond 2014. See too Costa and Fausto 2010 for an important review.
- 9 Virtually any issue of Papua New Guinea's two major newspapers, the *Post Courier* and the *National*, reference these problems. On environmental despoliation concerning mining, see, for instance, Ballard and Banks 2003, Kirsch 2014, and Jacka 2015. For an overview of the social and environmental effects of forest extraction, see Sillitoe and Filer 2014.
- 10 See Lipuma 2001, Knauf 2002, and West 2006 for discussions of ways Papua New Guineans have incorporated important aspects of introduced ontologies.
- 11 In his foreword, Sahlins stated that "Claude Lévi-Strauss . . . was the last of the Big-Time Thinkers of the discipline, the likes of the long gone and increasingly forgotten anthropological forebears such as E. B. Tylor, Lewis Henry Morgan, James Frazer, A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, Ruth Benedict, and A. L. Kroeber" (2013, xi). Perhaps tellingly, all of these thinkers were comparativists (and many, unilinear evolutionists) who engaged in little fieldwork. Absent from the list is Bronislaw Malinowski, whose detailed descriptions and grounded analyses of Trobriand Island culture transformed the discipline, many think for the better.
- 12 See Fortune 1933, Mead 1935, and Mead 1938.
- 13 For an informative analysis of how the collapse of this tourist trade impacted another Sepik people, see Silverman 2012.
- 14 The medical etiology is unclear to us.

15 The same pseudonyms are used for these four young lives as in Gewertz and Errington 2004.

16 Both the Chambri and the Iatmul have scarified their young men to resemble ancestral crocodiles; played sacred flutes in large men's houses; valued mothers' brothers; regulated the universe with secret names; known Margaret Mead, Reo Fortune, and Gregory Bateson; and lost the tourist trade as a vital source of income. They have as well taken heads from each other and, currently, are competing for the resources of Chambri Lake.

17 Papua New Guinea was, after all, often referred to—including by locals—as the “land of the unexpected” where “triam tasol” (nothing ventured, nothing gained) prevailed.

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## Abstract

In this article, we provide an update on a combined biography of Chambri friends and acquaintances living in their Papua New Guinea home villages and beyond, a biography originally published in 1991 but based on 1987 field research. Incorporating fieldwork extending over the subsequent twenty-eight years, we describe what has happened to some of those we came to know best. In so doing, we address twenty-first century anthropological questions concerning contemporary ontology(ies) and the nature of difference(s) by conveying how these Chambri have continued to seek personal and collective worth, while remaining caught up in an encroaching and shifting regional, national, as well as world system.

KEYWORDS: Papua New Guinea, ontologies, histories, biographies, sociocultural change